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Congressman's Exit Closes Book On 'Watergate Babies'

by **RON ELVING**

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Henry Waxman's retirement means more than the loss of a legendary legislator on health care, energy and other regulatory issues. It also closes an era that began 40 years ago with the election of the "Watergate babies."

When Waxman departs, there will no longer be a House member who has been serving since that historic class of 75 Democrats was first elected in 1974. One classmate who had been, George Miller of California, announced his retirement several weeks earlier in January.

(Asterisk alert: Minnesota Democrat Rick Nolan first came to Congress with the '74 class but retired voluntarily in 1980, returning to be a "freshman" again in 2012.)

In the Senate, one member of the Democratic class of 1974 will remain after the November election: Pat Leahy of Vermont, who is now the most senior member of the chamber. That, too, says something about how long ago Watergate was.

They called the great surge of Democrats "Watergate babies"

because of their youth (their average age was two decades below the previous party average) and because so many owed their election to the Watergate scandal. What had begun as a bungled burglary at the Democratic Party HQ in the Watergate Hotel in Washington had led to two years of investigations by journalists, the FBI and Congress. Ultimately, the burglary was traced to the campaign operation of President Richard M. Nixon, and the ensuing cover-up to the Oval Office itself.

Nixon resigned in August 1974 in the face of impending impeachment, and three months later his Republican Party suffered a severe drubbing in the midterm elections. The GOP also bore the brunt of high inflation and an oil embargo that sent gas prices to historic highs. The party was especially vulnerable to a wave election because it had captured many seats in Congress alongside Nixon's re-election in 1972, a 49-state landslide.

But it was not only the gargantuan size of the '74 class that made it historic. The members of the class of 1974 were young, relatively new to public office and remarkably certain they could remake Washington in their own image. Half were under the age of 40. Tom Downey of New York was just 25, the youngest member since the early 1800s.

This new generation of Democrats offered a new image for their party. They viewed Congress as ossified, beholden to powerful interests, unresponsive to the people and ripe for the taking.

Far more than their senior colleagues in the House, they understood the social trends and beliefs that had typified the previous 10 years. Most of them supported the Supreme Court decisions that had legalized abortion and outlawed prayer in schools. Most of them backed busing to achieve racial balance in the schools.

Few were true populists. They were college-educated and professionally credentialed. "We were the children of Vietnam, not World War II," said Tim Wirth of Colorado. "We were products of television, not of print. We were products of computer politics, not courthouse politics. And we were reflections of JFK as president, not FDR."

They were more likely to have been part of the anti-war movement than of the organized labor movement, and few were creatures of the party establishment. One new member, from the suburbs of

Philadelphia, was a 31-year-old Methodist minister named Bob Edgar who had begun his campaign by looking up "Democratic" in the phone book to find the local headquarters.

As a class they would come to represent a watershed in the politics of the House and of the Democratic Party — indeed in the politics of the nation as a whole.

Not all of the 75 House newbies were liberals, but most were. Moreover, their geographic distribution heavily favored the West, Midwest and Northeast — the regions where Republicans had previously enjoyed an edge. There weren't many Watergate babies from the South, where most of the seats were already held by traditional Dixie Democrats and were unaffected by the Watergate tide.

But once the election was over, the clash between the new arrivals and the "old bulls" was immediately manifest in Democratic caucus meetings. One elderly chairman, called to speak to the freshman class, addressed them as "boys and girls." He, and several of his cohort, soon found themselves without their gavels. (A recent rule change had made the chairmanships subject to a vote of the full caucus, not just the members of each committee.)

Waxman and Miller were typical of the new class. At 35 and 29, they were not far removed from their student days at UCLA and Berkeley, where they were supporters of the civil rights movement and opponents of the Vietnam War. They joined the activist Democratic Study Group and pushed the leadership to the left on a range of issues, even as they rose through seniority to chair major committees: Waxman at Energy and Commerce, Miller at Education and Labor.

Their generation, and sympatico members elected in subsequent cycles, gradually relocated the party's center of gravity, moving more to the left and from Southern to national. This trend accelerated in the 1980s and '90s as more women, African-Americans and Hispanics became members.

The House that had been Democratic from 1954 to 1974 with one prevailing culture remained Democratic for the next 20 years with an increasingly different Democratic cast.

All of this culminated in another wave election — a Republican one. It

came in 1994 when Democrats were defending a large number of vacancies and defending a young president named Bill Clinton. New district lines in the South had concentrated minority voters and so empowered Republicans in surrounding, predominantly white districts.

Suddenly, the GOP had its first majority in the chamber in 40 years, and an upstart Georgia Republican named Newt Gingrich was the speaker. Known as the "Contract with America" class for its 10-point campaign program, the GOP surge of 1994 had 73 Republicans to just 13 Democrats.

The early phases of the two classes have much history in common. Both came to Washington full of rhetorical energy about the changes to be wrought in the social and economic structure of the nation. Both enjoyed the strength in numbers and the sense of shared purpose that would enable them to make a difference immediately on Capitol Hill — particularly on issues of internal reform.

Before their first term was over, a bitter leadership race further divided the class, dissipating much of what was left of their solidarity. The Watergate babies split badly over the competing ambitions of their mentors, leading reformer Richard Bolling of Missouri and passionate liberal crusader Phil Burton of California, both of whom were running for majority leader (neither won; the job went instead to Jim Wright of Texas).

The Watergate babies continued to hold class meetings, but their original sense of mission and cohesion drained away. They were divided by region, by issues and by their competing ambitions. "Anyone who thought we would be doing anything together beyond the first month was mistaken," said class member David Evans of Indiana.

All but two class members who ran for re-election won in 1976, but thereafter the game got rougher in a hurry. Reaction to Watergate had run its course, and Democratic President Jimmy Carter was generating a reaction of his own: The GOP gained a net of nearly 50 seats in the elections of 1978 and 1980.

The era of President Ronald Reagan pushed the Watergate babies to the margins of national policymaking. After years of considering themselves the cutting edge of Congress, they found themselves fighting rear-guard battles instead.

By the 1990s, the Watergate babies had attenuated as a presence in the House. One ambitious subgroup had moved on to the Senate (Tsongas, Wirth, Max Baucus of Montana, Christopher J. Dodd of Connecticut, Tom Harkin of Iowa and Paul Simon of Illinois). Just as many, however, had tried for the Senate and lost.

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